

SUPERIOR COURT OF CALIFORNIA, COUNTY OF VENTURA

SELF-HELP LEGAL ACCESS CENTERS

Project Summary:

The Ventura County Superior Court has developed a unique approach to providing access to justice in all areas of the law through the Self-Help Legal Access (SHLA) Centers. Recognizing that legal problems are frequently symptomatic of larger social problems such as poverty, illiteracy, substance abuse and domestic violence, the SHLA Centers work closely with community organizations and agencies to provide comprehensive assistance to self-represented litigants in all areas of law other than family law. The SHLA Centers operate during court hours at the Hall of Justice in Ventura, and in *La Colonia*, a low income, and primarily Spanish speaking community in Oxnard. Family law issues are addressed in the court's Family Law Self-Help Centers, located in both county courthouses and on designated days in the second SHLA Center located in *La Colonia*.

The newest addition to the court's self-help program is a Mobile Self-Help Center that takes the SHLA Center on the road to bring services to outlying communities in the county. Contained in a custom-built 35' motor home, the Mobile Self-Help Center is designed to reach those members of our population unable to utilize the other SHLA Centers. It is modeled after the public library "book mobiles," and is outfitted with computer and video stations, bookshelves, and material racks for displaying self-help materials. The SHLA Center staff, on a rotating basis, staffs the Mobile Self-Help Center, using volunteers, much as they are used in the two stationary centers. Recognizing that there will never be sufficient resources to locate permanent centers in all geographic areas of the county, the court's new mobile unit helps insure access to all members of the community.

The SHLA Centers' target group is comprised primarily of low to moderate-income individuals and families for whom retaining a private lawyer is not economically feasible. Of those who reported income, almost half the people seeking assistance in the SHLA Centers report monthly income under \$1,000. An additional 22% have income under \$2,000 a month.

The philosophy of the SHLA Centers is that through education and empowerment of self-represented litigants access to justice will be better assured, respect for and confidence in our judicial system will be strengthened, and our court will operate more efficiently to handle the growing demand for limited judicial resources.

I. The Need for Broad Based Self Help Services

The Ventura County Superior Court's Self-Help Legal Access (SHLA) Centers were established to respond to the growing needs of self-represented litigants in areas other than family law. The SHLA Centers provide *pro se* litigants educational materials, one-

on-one assistance, and referral to numerous non-legal resources so they can better navigate the court system and understand the judicial process.

The SHLA Centers, located just off the main lobby in the Ventura County Hall of Justice, and in a Multipurpose Building in *La Colonia*, are easily accessible to the public. They are open during court hours and operate on a “drop-in” basis. People coming into a center are asked to complete an intake form that provides the center staff with information about the type of matter for which the person is seeking assistance. After completing the intake form, people are either helped by an attorney or by support staff. Individuals are given assistance in completing forms, conducting legal research, calculating deadlines and understanding their legal options. They are also referred to other resources, including low cost or free legal services, housing shelters, substance abuse treatment programs, domestic violence programs, job placement programs, and other sources of assistance to help meet their needs.

A SHLA Center is also located in the East County Hall of Justice in Simi Valley. It has limited hours, and shares a room with the Family Law Self-Help Center, which also operates on a more limited basis in the East County. The Ventura SHLA Center is slated to move in or about September 2002 from its present location adjacent to the main lobby to the Ventura County Law Library housed in the same building as the Ventura Hall of Justice.

Community outreach plays a significant role in the centers’ work to develop greater public trust and understanding for the judicial system. The SHLA Centers participate in community forums about the justice system and conduct educational seminars on substantive areas of law affecting the community. The SHLA Centers coordinating attorneys work closely with area schools through the implementation of the Teen Court program. This program provides real-life civics lessons to students; gives young people an opportunity to take responsibility for their actions; provides restitution to victims; and gives the community an active role in reducing the likelihood of repeated delinquent acts. The SHLA Centers maintain a library of books, pamphlets and videotapes particularly targeted to teens encouraging them to explore alternatives to youth violence, and educating them about the legal rights and obligations of minors and young adults.

The SHLA Centers work closely with community organizations to serve the public and the self-represented litigant with a variety of needs. The SHLA Centers assist people in all areas of civil law and procedure, although Family Law matters are generally referred to a Family Law Self-Help Center which is specifically devoted to provide assistance in the field of family law. In addition to a full range of civil matters, the SHLA Centers also assist with criminal infractions, helping those contesting a traffic citation or attempting to seal a juvenile record. Criminal law matters involving misdemeanors or felonies are referred to the Public Defender’s Office.

A full-time attorney coordinator and an experienced bilingual court clerk staff each SHLA Center. Volunteer attorneys, student interns, paralegals, and others in the legal community also assist the public under the direction of the center coordinator. The centers have computer terminals for litigants to access information about the status of their cases or to obtain legal information via the Internet. They also have video stations

for people to view videotapes on a variety of subjects, including conservatorship, domestic violence, jury service, disabled access, date rape, landlord/tenant law, how to present one's case in court, and other legal topics of interest to *pro se* litigants and to the general public. Additionally, the SHLA Centers maintain a library of user-friendly books written for lay people, as well as brochures, pamphlets and how-to manuals on many subjects. Topics include adoption, name change, family law, landlord/tenant law, guardianship, conservatorship, neighbor disputes, general civil litigation, appeals, alternative dispute resolution, consumer law, small claims, traffic infractions and juvenile law.

The SHLA Centers recognize that many people may have difficulty coming to the courthouse during business hours to get the assistance they need. Others may prefer the anonymity of seeking assistance by phone or the Internet. Although the centers early on developed an Interactive Voice Response (IVR) system to provide extensive legal information over the phone, they abandoned it because the public found it too cumbersome to navigate. Instead the centers have focused on improving the court's web site and linking with the California Judicial Council Self-Help web site for extensive information. This information includes deadlines to respond, common affirmative defenses to eviction and other civil actions, tips on trial preparation, and definitions of common legal terms and court proceedings.

The Mobile Self-Help Center serves as a self-contained mobile version of the SHLA Centers, though its contents and the services it provides are not as extensive. It is parked at existing community services centers such as the Santa Paula Job and Career Center, Ventura Catholic Charities, Ojai Park and Ride, Leisure Village Community Center, and Thousand Oaks Public Library. The Mobile Center follows a schedule with specific days and times so the public will know when and where they can get assistance. The Mobile Center allows the public to easily access support services such as research materials, annotated codebooks, social service agencies and other community based resources. From its computers people can usually access information about their court cases, as well as legal information via the Internet.

People using the SHLA Centers are provided information on court procedures and how to research the law in their case. Information about low cost or free legal services in the community is also provided. The centers' staff does not give legal advice such as one would obtain from private legal counsel. There is no confidentiality or attorney/client relationship between attorneys in the centers and the self-represented litigants who seek legal information. The center staff provides information about procedure, substantive law and choices litigants have, allowing people to make informed decisions about their cases. Staff assists litigants in completing forms by explaining what information is being sought. For example, if a defendant is preparing an answer in an unlawful detainer case, staff can explain the issue of raising an affirmative defense and the legal theories of different affirmative defenses. They cannot, however, instruct the defendant which affirmative defenses apply to his or her case. That decision remains with the self-represented litigant, although the centers help provide the information necessary to make an informed decision.

There are intake and evaluation forms that those using the centers are asked to complete. The intake form includes information about monthly income. People are not required to provide income information but are requested to do so on a voluntary basis. They are assured that the centers provide assistance to anyone who requests help, regardless of income, and that there is no “eligibility” requirement to use the centers. Intake data indicates that 72% have household incomes under \$2,000 per month. The income level of those using the centers confirms that most cannot afford legal representation from private attorneys, nor can existing *pro bono* and legal aid programs meet the demands of the increasing numbers of people in need of legal assistance without the ability to pay.

Many of the people coming to the SHLA Centers for assistance do not speak English. The SHLA Centers have full-time Spanish-speaking staff and a fair amount of the written material in the centers is available in English and Spanish. In the SHLA Center located in *La Colonia*, the attorney coordinator and staff are fully bilingual. To improve access for the Spanish-speaking population, the Ventura County Superior Court first contracted with a local community college to have a college instructor teach conversational Spanish to interested court staff during the lunch hour twice a week. A court interpreter who also teaches Spanish at a local community college then taught the classes. The Spanish classes were coordinated through the SHLA Centers. Thirty court employees participated in the first 15-week course. By bringing a college instructor to the court to teach conversational Spanish to the staff, the court is better able to serve a diverse community. The second class at an intermediate level had a smaller attendance, but those who completed the program were able to converse on a limited basis with the Spanish-speaking public. This in turn reduced the public’s waiting time for an interpreter to be called, and reduced demands on the court’s limited bilingual staff.

The SHLA Centers also assist with community outreach and education. Center staff network with other community service agencies and non-profit organizations to help people access the help they need. Often the problem that brings one to court is only a part of a larger social problem that requires diverse resources to comprehensively address. The SHLA Centers can refer people to non-legal resources, such as battered women’s shelters, consumer fraud units, job training and placement programs, and support and advocacy groups. Educational programs are taken into the community on subjects including landlord/tenant law, consumer fraud, domestic violence and driving under the influence.

The Mobile Self-Help Center is available to go to schools and community functions where court information will be helpful. It helps to expand the court’s educational outreach to the community by providing legal information, especially to the most vulnerable populations, including the poor, non-English speaking, the elderly, the disabled, and victims of domestic violence.

II. Planning and Implementation

The SHLA Center concept began as an idea born in the minds of an innovative and progressive court administration led by Executive Officer Sheila Gonzalez, after whom a creative court clerk later affectionately named the centers by way of acronym. The

Ventura County Superior Court already had a Pro Per Family Law Clinic, but it was felt that a different center was needed to handle the other needs of self-represented litigants in the court. Because of the enormous demand for family law services, there was concern that if the same program handled both family law and all other areas of law, family law would consume all the resources and leave *pro se* litigants in other matters without adequate assistance. The concept of the centers was fully endorsed by the Honorable Charles W. Campbell, Jr., then Presiding Judge of the Ventura County Superior Court. The self-help programs continue to receive the support of the court's current Executive Officer, Michael Planet, and the bench.

The initial proposal for the SHLA Center (originally called the "Pro Per Information Center") was prepared by then Assistant Executive Officer Florence Prushan and was presented in early 1997. The court selected a location for the proposed center that would be easily accessible to the public and sought a coordinator for the program who would serve as an ombudsman for the court and a liaison with other human service agencies in the community. An attorney skilled in building community relations and coordinating with other community agencies in both the public and private sector was sought. A licensed attorney was necessary in order to provide legal information to the public, and strong community involvement was essential in order to gain the support of the private bar and other community agencies.

The first SHLA Center coordinator was hired, and the physical location for the center was completed. While the center was being constructed, the coordinator developed materials and brochures, solicited volunteers, and contacted community groups and organizations to coordinate services.

The project director, in collaboration with the center coordinator, determined the contents of the center. Special consideration was given to making the center "user friendly" to everyone regardless of language or disability. A Braille sign distinguishes the entrance, materials are available in English and Spanish, video stations have special equipment for the hearing impaired, workstations and tables are easy to access, and the center has a welcoming atmosphere. One user equated the center with a "recovery room."

Eleven months after the SHLA Center opened in the courthouse, the second center opened in *La Colonia*, in Oxnard. This center mirrors the courthouse center in its staffing, materials, and types of service, but a greater percentage of resources are devoted to the Spanish speaking since they comprise the majority of users at the *Colonia* location. The coordinator for the second center was selected based on the same criteria used to select the original SHLA Center coordinator. Besides strong community ties, the coordinator had to be bilingual and familiar with the population base to be served. The long time director of the local legal aid program, and then bar association president, was hired.

In less than two years from the date the first SHLA Center opened, the Mobile Self-Help Center went on the road. Invitations from many cities in the county were received, a schedule of visitation sites was finalized, and driver training for the SHLA Center coordinators was arranged with local law enforcement. Volunteer attorneys and support personnel were solicited to help staff this newest court outreach project.

The local bar association has been extremely supportive of the SHLA Centers. The private bar support is fostered in part by the coordinators' involvement with various bar committees which address the delivery of legal services to the community. These include the Ventura County Bar Association's Volunteer Legal Services Program, Lawyer Referral and Information Service, Public Education, and *Pro Bono* Program Fundraising Committees. The court and the bar share the common goal of ensuring the delivery of legal services to all segments of the community, access to justice, and increasing positive public perceptions of the judicial system. Building on this common goal the court and bar work well together to staff the SHLA Centers and Mobile Self-Help Center, and perform educational outreach to the community.

III. Alternatives and Selected Solution

The court originally considered expanding the Family Law Pro Per Clinic to handle other types of matters and consolidating the self-help programs into one center. This alternative was abandoned because of concern that family law would overwhelm the other areas of law where people need assistance simply because of the enormous demand *pro se* litigants place on the family law court. For this reason, the Ventura County Superior Court decided to keep family matters differentiated from other areas of law where *pro se* litigants need assistance by having family law issues addressed in the Family Law Self-Help Centers.

The court has grappled with the problem of maintaining neutrality and impartiality while providing legal assistance to self-represented litigants. Drawing the line between legal advocacy and legal information is not always easy. In order to help people understand that the court is not providing them with private legal counsel, the intake form includes a disclosure each person is required to sign before consulting with an attorney or staff in the center. The disclosure is explained so each person understands that both sides in a case may be using the center for assistance. This is particularly true in unlawful detainer cases where both the landlord and tenant may use the center, or in contested guardianships where relatives on opposite sides may seek assistance in completing forms.

IV. Target Group

The SHLA Centers' specific target group is comprised primarily of low to moderate-income individuals and families for whom retaining a private lawyer is not economically feasible. Statistics support that this target group is being reached. Of those who reported income, almost half the people seeking assistance in the SHLA Centers report monthly income under \$1,000. An additional 22% have income under \$2,000 a month. Many qualify for fee waivers and are receiving some type of public assistance. Information about affordable legal services is provided, and people are encouraged to seek guidance from private and confidential legal counsel whenever feasible.

Certainly self-represented litigants are the primary direct beneficiaries of the centers' services. However, all parties and their legal counsel benefit when *pro se* litigants understand the court process, come prepared for their hearings, and are able to present their cases in less time. Frequently *pro se* litigants file incomplete or incorrect pleadings or pursue improper remedies simply through ignorance of the law or court process, and

the other side is forced to respond, sometimes at considerable cost. Having a place to come where one can get information about how to research the law and learn about the elements of a cause of action, or the availability of a particular remedy, helps avoid frustrating and costly delays for all parties.

The SHLA Centers also reach out to the youth in our community with educational programs, Teen Court, and information about alternatives to youth violence. The coordinators are actively involved with youth mentorship programs in the community and with Teen Court in the county's secondary and middle schools. Working with Teen Court and other early intervention programs, the SHLA Centers serve as an additional resource in reducing juvenile crime.

V. Project Details

Implementation of the project was undertaken by a committed court administration with the support of the Presiding Judge. Funding for the centers was included in the court's budget. Sheila Gonzalez, then Executive Officer, proposed the project concept in the budget presentation to the Board of Supervisors. The project concept was met with great enthusiasm. The board felt it made "good sense" for the community, and the project was funded. Implementation took approximately six months.

The SHLA Centers have a number of services available to assist self-represented litigants utilizing a combination of court facilities and staff and automation technologies.

A. LOCATION

The Ventura SHLA Center is currently located adjacent to the main lobby in the Ventura County Hall of Justice, though it is scheduled to move to the Ventura County Law Library in September 2002. While its proximity to the information kiosk in the lobby and the jury assembly room have made the center easy to find, its move to the law library will facilitate access to additional research materials. The center has full disabled access, including a Braille sign at the entrance. The door to the center remains open during most court hours so people can see inside and feel welcome to come in.

The second SHLA Center in Oxnard is located in the multi-purpose building, housing a library, housing office and other community services. *La Colonia* is a low income and working class gateway community, in which many residents own their own homes and provide transitional housing for newly arrived immigrant relatives. With a large Spanish speaking population, and poverty issues confronting residents, transportation to the courthouse in Ventura often presents an insurmountable problem. In addition to language barriers, those from other countries are often suspicious of government, making a trip to the courthouse at the county government center a frightening experience. Locating a self-help center in an impoverished and gateway community, and away from the government seat, helps bring essential court services to those most in need, without the intimidation they might otherwise feel.

The Mobile Self-Help Center can travel to different parts of the county based on local need. Recognizing that there will never be sufficient resources to locate permanent centers in all geographic areas of the county, the court acquired the Mobile Self-Help Center to expand access with minimal operating cost. Initial funding for the mobile unit was obtained from a private grant. Operating costs will be contained by the court's reliance on volunteers, much as they are used in the two existing centers. Even before the Mobile Self-Help Center was fully operational, the court received many offers from private attorneys volunteering to help.

The Simi SHLA Center is located on the second floor of the East County Hall of Justice. It is housed in the Family Law Self-Help Center and currently operates on Monday afternoons. The facility is used for family law on Thursdays.

B. STAFFING AND THE USE OF VOLUNTEERS

A full-time attorney coordinator and an experienced bilingual court clerk staff the Ventura and Oxnard SHLA Centers. The Simi SHLA Center is staffed by an attorney coordinator and law student interns. In order to serve the large volume of people needing one-on-one assistance with a limited budget, the SHLA Centers have developed an extensive volunteer program recruiting from local law schools, legal secretary and bar associations. Retired business people have also been a good resource for volunteers.

Most of the volunteers in the SHLA Centers are third and fourth year law students who have sufficient familiarity with legal principles to assist self-represented litigants in completing most standardized court forms, under the guidance and direction of an attorney in each center. The students benefit by earning school credits, learning civil procedure first hand, and improving communication skills with the people they serve. The public benefits by having knowledgeable people ready to assist them, without having to wait in line for a single attorney. The attorney coordinators, or volunteer attorneys staffing the centers when the coordinators are away, benefit by having a law student interview the self-represented litigant to distill the relevant facts, and then present the legal issue to the attorney. This spares the attorney's time listening to people vent, while still providing the public with a sympathetic ear to express themselves.

Most matters handled in the SHLA Centers can be adequately addressed by center staff without consulting the attorney. These include helping people complete answer forms to unlawful detainer and other civil cases, complete guardianship petition form packets, organize small claims cases, and file traffic appeals. An attorney is available for at least some time each day for those questions beyond the scope of the center staff, such as neighbor disputes, employment law issues, or other civil litigation matters.

C. OPERATIONS

The SHLA Centers are open during court hours. The centers operate on a “drop-in” basis rather than by appointment. Telephone information provided by staff is generally limited to hours of operation, location, and a description of the type of services available in the center. On rare occasions when people call from out of state or from a long distance, limited information can be provided by phone. However, we encourage people to come into the center whenever possible, since staff’s ability to assist is far enhanced by being able to see the papers the person brings with them and show the individual what needs to be done.

D. SERVICES

1. **Preventative Law.** A major component of the centers focus on education as well as comprehensive assistance for those whose problems reach beyond the traditional court process. The SHLA Center coordinators network with the local bar association, legal aid providers, and community organizations such as Interface, Catholic Charities, and STEPS recovery program, among others, to help address the comprehensive needs of *pro se* litigants.

The SHLA Center coordinators also work with the community to present information on substantive areas of law in an effort to reduce legal conflict necessitating court intervention. Presentations on legal subjects such as landlord/tenant law have also been broadcast on local cable television. Speakers are available to address community groups and organizations on subjects of interest. For example, the SHLA Centers have sent speakers to a local grandparents support group to present a program on guardianships. The SHLA Centers, working with a local cable company, produced a series of programs on legal issues aired on community access television. Videos of the programs were provided by the cable company free of charge for ongoing use in the center. The local bar association’s Public Education Committee thereafter took over production of the videos through a biweekly program called *Law Talk*. The SHLA Center coordinators continue to produce numerous *Law Talk* segments on legal topics of interest to the general public.

The coordinators also regularly contribute to publications, including a weekly question and answer column on legal issues that appears in a local county newspaper. Information about alternatives to litigation, such as mediation, is provided in the SHLA Centers, particularly to those involved in neighbor disputes. Referrals are made to community based mediation programs, and the concept of mediation is explained to people who often mistake the process with arbitration.

Extensive materials are available to youth on legal subjects affecting them. The SHLA Center coordinators work with local junior high and high schools to expand Teen Court and develop justice classes and curriculum

further educating young people about the legal process and the rule of law. Teen Court allows students to take responsibility for reducing juvenile crime, and curbing inappropriate conduct by their peers.

2. **Education Materials for Youth.** Included in the SHLA Center libraries are a number of videos and publications written for adolescents including subjects such as date rape, violence free relationships, youth law, rights of students and Teen Court. Court tours bring students to the Hall of Justice center to ask questions about the judicial system and the law, and teen defendants sentenced by peer juries in Teen Court can use the Hall of Justice center to research alternatives to fighting and other behavioral offenses.

3. **Computer Stations.** Each SHLA Center has computer terminals for the public to access information about their cases and other legal information located on the Internet. Legal sites are bookmarked for easy reference. The computers in the SHLA Centers have listings of both civil and criminal cases. Those with limited computer skills can receive assistance from center staff in accessing the information.

4. **Internet.** Each SHLA Center is included as part of the Ventura County Superior Court's web site, and much of their written material is available on the Internet for those who either have difficulty coming to the courthouse or who simply prefer to access information online.

5. **Video Stations.** Each SHLA Center has video stations for people to view videotapes on many subjects including conservatorship, which is mandated viewing by anyone seeking to be appointed as a conservator in a case. Many videos are available in English and Spanish, and special equipment is available for the hearing impaired.

The court is continuing to work with local cable companies to expand the SHLA Centers' video library. The videos produced help educate self-represented litigants, and the general public, about substantive and procedural legal issues. Through the local bar association's Public Education Committee and its *Law Talk* program, the court develops the subject matter for many of the videos and provides the "talent." The cable companies produce the videos free of charge in exchange for the right to air the videos on local public access programming in Ventura County. Through this partnership, the public can become better educated about the role of the courts and the rule of law, and the court can expand its video self-help library without incurring additional costs.

6. **Books, Pamphlets and Brochures.** The SHLA Centers have materials written for non-lawyers, such as *Nolo Press* books, on subjects commonly encountered by self-represented litigants. The centers also have brochures published by the State Bar of California targeted toward consumers of legal services, along with State Bar pamphlets on legal

literacy, Law for Kids and other matters of interest to the public. The centers have materials from the local bar association, community agencies and non-profit organizations on subjects ranging from debt reorganization to battered women's shelters. A variety of materials are available to the public on Alternative Dispute Resolution ("ADR"), both explaining what it is and how to proceed in different ADR forums.

7. **Self-Help Instruction Manuals and Packets.** The SHLA Centers continue to develop instruction manuals and packets for self-represented litigants in various areas of the law, including landlord/tenant, traffic, contract based actions, personal injury actions, small claims, step-parent adoption, name change, guardianship, conservatorship, general civil proceedings and appeals. Sample Judicial Council forms and local forms are provided as well as sample self-drafted pleadings for certain motions for which form pleadings do not exist.

8. **Expanding Access to Legal Representation.** The SHLA Centers work with the local bar association and the court developing strategies to encourage private attorney *pro bono* involvement. Innovative ways to provide free and low cost legal services are explored including the bar association's recent training program for attorneys on how to provide task-by-task representation of clients, sometimes referred to as "unbundled" legal services. Attorneys willing to accept *pro bono* representation of a client in an entire case are encouraged to participate through the county bar association's *pro bono* program; others are encouraged to donate time assisting in the SHLA Centers. The Ventura County Superior Court has actively encouraged *pro bono* attorney involvement by publicly recognizing contributions, and giving priority on the court calendar to those cases in which the attorney is appearing *pro bono* through one of the established volunteer attorney programs in the county.

9. **Telephone Information.** Although an Interactive Voice Response (IVR) system was originally developed so the public could call 24-hours a day, seven days a week to obtain procedural information about court process, this "road map" of information proved too cumbersome for most people to effectively use. Now the 24-hour telephone service is limited to information about the SHLA Centers and hours of operation. More detailed information is available on the Internet.

VI. Transfer or Replication Characteristics

The SHLA Center concept can be replicated in any jurisdiction where the commitment to serving the public has a high priority. Because it builds on existing resources in the community, the SHLA Center can provide a broad range of assistance with limited staff and money. The Ventura and Simi locations make it convenient for people to use without having to leave the courthouse. Proximity to the law library and county government offices facilitates easy access to other resources. The Oxnard location makes it convenient for people with limited transportation means, or fear of government, to access

court services, and its proximity to the public library and other community resources helps provide comprehensive assistance to those in need. The Mobile Self-Help Center helps insure that all areas of the county are served especially the most vulnerable segments of the community.

Local law schools and paralegal programs provide student interns who benefit from the broad range of experience they get in the centers assisting people with the completion of forms, legal research, and comprehension of the rules of court, all under the auspices of a licensed attorney. The volunteers help the program serve many more people on a limited budget. Using student interns also helps expose future attorneys to the range of human needs and propels them to think about alternatives to the delivery of legal services to meet those complex needs.

VII. Demonstrated Success

In its first year of operation over 6,000 people received assistance at the Ventura SHLA Center. Since the Oxnard center opened, it has seen a steady increase in the number of people needing assistance. Between the two SHLA Centers, and the Family Law Self-Help Centers approximately 2,000 people receive assistance each month. Of those who complete exit interviews, an overwhelming majority indicate the services of the centers are “very helpful;” few rate the services “somewhat helpful;” and almost none found them “not helpful.”

A president of the Ventura County Bar Association wrote in a letter: “The Ventura County Bar Association considers the center to be a most valuable resource to the community in that it tries to be as inclusive as possible of those persons who would otherwise not get their day in court. This is a tremendous service to our community as a whole, not simply to those who are utilizing the Self-Help Legal Access Center. The work of the center brings respect to our local court in that it is trying to help people understand the judicial and legal system and the individual’s role in it.”

The Ventura County Superior Court is proud of its unique program and hopes other jurisdictions will use the SHLA Centers as both an incentive and a guide in developing similar programs. As access to justice is broadened, so too will the public’s respect for our judicial system. Faith in an independent judiciary is vital to a democratic society. Ventura County Superior Court is pleased to play a significant role in nurturing that faith.